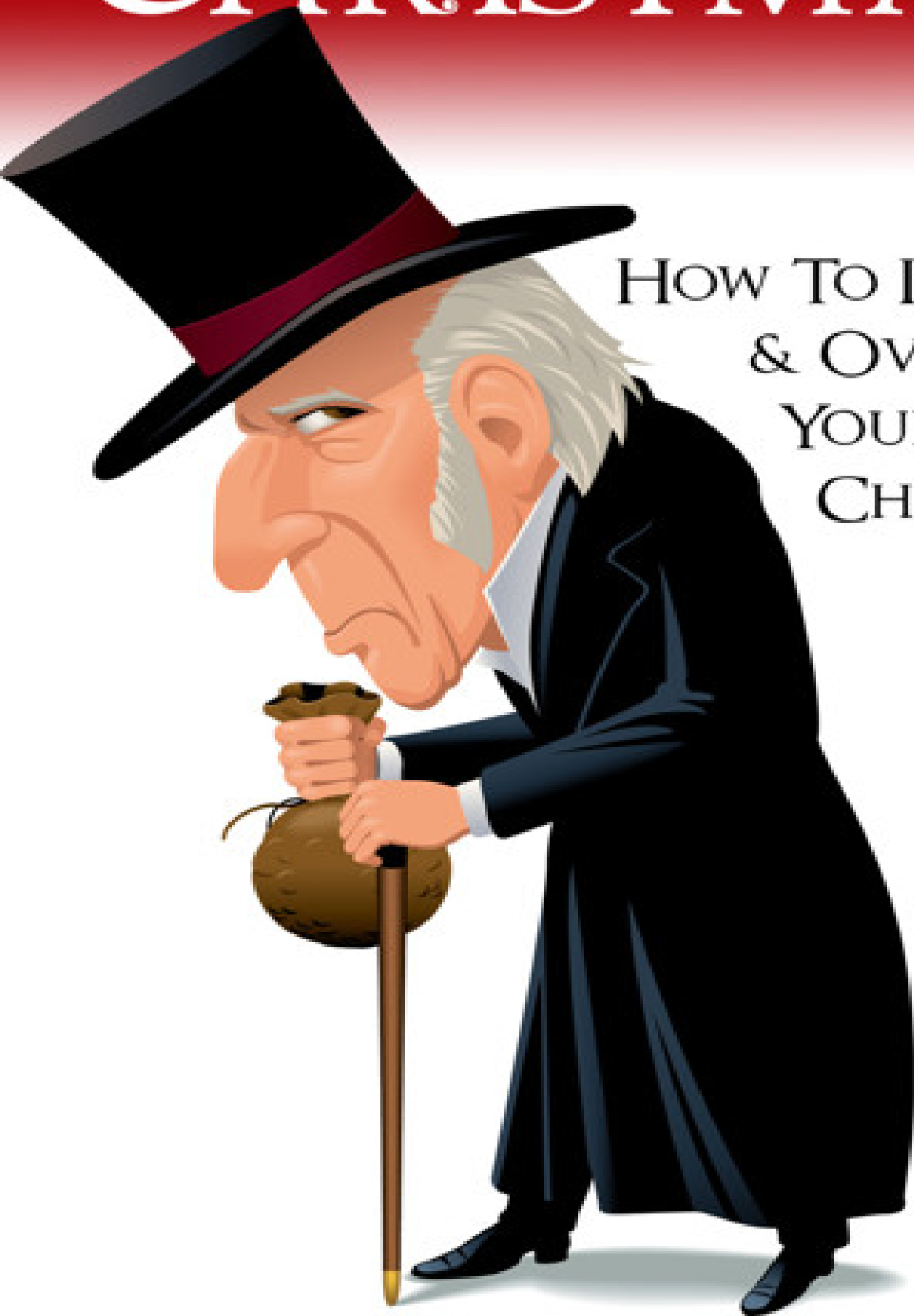


I HATE CHRISTMAS!

HOW TO IDENTIFY
& OVERCOME
YOUR INNER
CHRISTMAS
VILLAIN



I Hate Christmas!

*How to Identify and Overcome Your Inner
Christmas Villain*

By Paul Nowak

Cover Image by Anderson & Anderson

Introduction

The man who does not keep Christmas is an incomplete human being.

-G.K. Chesterton

The Illustrated London News, December 24, 1933

Somewhere between the time the first Christmas displays go up in the stores, until fallen Christmas trees line the curbs of suburbia, we all have at least a moment where we cannot wait until after Christmas.

At some point between the ever-earlier gift guides and Christmas advertising and the seemingly impossible task of fitting decorations back into boxes, we all have at least one moment where we sigh and recall what life was like outside of Christmastime.

It might be hearing a certain Christmas song once too many times. Or yet another trip to the shopping centers packed with people too busy for common courtesy. Or shuddering at the thought of all those Christmas cards to send. Or, the headache before going to church.

We may chide ourselves for not being in the spirit, or more likely our friends and family will remind us that it's Christmas time, and not to be such a Scrooge, or a Grinch, or some other unsavory character vilified in the movies that are brought out for their annual holiday showcase.

Have you ever given much thought to why you have unpleasant experiences during "the most wonderful time of the year?" Are you really as bad as Ebenezer Scrooge and the Grinch?

The holiday villains that have endeared themselves to us are works of human fiction, and in being such they are a reflection of real human experiences and traits. In other words, when we grow irritable with Christmas we are acting on the same principles as some of the most despicable villains of Christmas. But which one, and why? And most important, how do we overcome the issues with Christmas to enjoy it to its fullest?

These questions are the premise of this book, in which four infamous Christmas characters are compared to ordinary folk like you and I. They seem to be the four archetypes of all true Christmas villains, in those truly Christmas stories. They are not the one-dimensional destroyers of Christmas from countless "How X Saved Christmas" tales, but real true reflections of human characters with real human problems.

This is a Christmas book; that is, it is a book about the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. Whatever past, present, and future form of paganism shall use the traditions, trimmings and celebration, the purpose of Christmas is still marking the pivotal moment in history in which God became man for our salvation. Therefore this book is written from a Christian perspective. However, even if you are not Christian, there may be some comfort to be found in these pages.

The Grinch - The Distracted

*Every Who down In Who-ville liked Christmas a lot...
But The Grinch, Who lived just North of Who-ville, Did NOT!
The Grinch hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season!
Now, please don't ask why. No one quite knows the reason.*

The classic story of "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" is a reflection of its author, Theo Geisel. The Grinch lives on a mountain overlooking Who-ville, just as Geisel lived on Mt. Soledad, overlooking the town of La Jolla in California. The Grinch remarks that he has endured the Whos' celebrations for fifty-three years, and the story was published during Geisel's own 53rd Christmas season.

The parallels in the story are not accidental. Of all his characters and stories, Geisel chose vanity license plates for his car that read GRINCH. He told the San Diego Union in a 1976 interview that the Grinch was "a nasty anti-Christmas character that was really myself."

In the December 1957 issue of Redbook magazine, the same issue in which "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" appeared, he explained the inspiration for the story:

"I was brushing my teeth on the morning of the 26th of last December when I noted a very Grinch-ish countenance in the mirror. It was Seuss! Something had gone wrong with Christmas, I realized, or more likely with me. So I wrote the story about my sour friend, the Grinch, to see if I could discover something about Christmas that obviously I'd lost."

What was it about Christmas that Seuss had lost? Respectfully, I am not going to imply that my assumptions of the Grinch are the

reflection Geisel saw in his bathroom mirror. The Grinch reflects a common enough holiday attitude in the rest of us.

We throw phrases regarding the Grinch around for anyone who is lacking cheer, such as saying "Don't be such a Grinch." The implied meaning is that the one being called a Grinch is robbing others, or even just themselves, of the Christmas experience.

But what, exactly, is the Grinch's problem with Christmas? (Disregarding the lengthy backstory created in the Jim Carrey movie version and sticking to the roots, of course.) Before we can treat the Grinch, we need to identify what it is that drives him to such extreme hatred of Christmas.

While Seuss' book states that "The Grinch hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season!" it does specifically cite three complaints. First, there is the noise of the celebration on Christmas morning, beginning with the children getting their toys. Secondly, the feasting is mentioned, including "rare Who-roast beef." Finally, the story mentions the Whos gathering hand-in-hand and singing, accompanied by Christmas bells.

In his futile attempt to stop Christmas, the Grinch steals the gifts, the decorations, and the food for the feast in the hope of causing the Whos to bemoan the loss of Christmas. It is when he realizes that the items he stole did not in fact constitute Christmas – something the Whos demonstrate by singing their Christmas song anyway – that the Grinch is converted, returns the gifts, and participates fully in the celebrations.

It appears that the Grinch's hatred of Christmas stems from an assumption that Christmas is a noisy, meaningless celebration. To the Grinch, the Whos were silly, shallow, and sentimental creatures that were incapable of genuine feelings of goodwill during the Christmas season.

The noise and the toys can represent the bustle and increased activity Christmas brings. From late October (or earlier) through the end of December, just about everywhere you look the world is changed to all things Christmas. When you see it year after year, in every place, for two solid months, it gets old. Knowing that many commercial interests, such as stores and corporate-sponsored displays are in it only for the money makes it worse.

The giving of gifts, driven by an undercurrent of enterprising retailers and manufacturers, has become a necessity of the Christmas season. Charities solicit donations of toys, for there is nothing more sad than the image of a child with no gifts at Christmas. When you stop to think of it, the poverty of that idea is much more melancholy than the lack of gifts.

The feast, including a “rare” roast beast suggests the extravagance of the season. We eat too much. We spend too much. We buy things we do not need. Rather than joy, the deadly sins of gluttony and greed seem to be more common sentiments of the season. The cynical realization that some who so lavishly celebrate Christmas care little for the reason or principles of the holiday reeks of hypocrisy. The idea of such an odious twisting of the celebration leads to anger, and from anger to sullenness, snarkiness, depression, and in the case of the Grinch, thoughts of malice and ill will.

The singing can easily be likened to the seasonal music heard at Christmas. From sanitized muzak pumped into shopping venues (as studies show it increases sales, retail stores willingly employ it for the sake of the bottom line) to the seemingly unending Christmas songs playing on the radio by every entertainer – including those that are Jewish, agnostic, or openly criticize Christianity the rest of the year - we are subjected to an overwhelming tide of Christmas “sing” every year.

The Grinch’s issue with Christmas is that he is distracted. The things used in the celebration of Christmas – the trimmings, the

singing, the gifts, the food – irritate him immensely. He no longer sees (if he ever did) the reason for celebrating Christmas itself. Because he does not see the why, the celebration of Christmas rings hollow and noisy.

Those of us who share the Grinch's distraction also get irritated by the trappings of Christmas – or too caught up in them. We may not be driven to do away with Christmas all together, but have you ever found yourself saying or thinking, "I can't wait until Christmas is over," impatiently waiting for the Christmas season to pass so life can get back to normal?

You may even enjoy Christmas, and most of the celebratory activities. However, one or more things annoy you just enough to make you want to get it over with. It may be sending Christmas cards, caroling, family pictures, baking, visiting relatives, shopping, or keeping some other tradition that you don't enjoy or has become so great a hassle that it has begun to stand between you and Christmas.

Traditions are a good thing, but like Christmas cookies, too much of them can be hazardous to your health.

There is a story about a family Christmas dinner, in which the hostess was preparing the turkey on Christmas morning. Just before putting the bird in the oven, she cut the neck off and placed it beside the turkey in the roasting pan.

"Why did you do that?" asked her mother, with a curious expression on her face.

"Because you always did mom," smiled the hostess. "I figured it was a family tradition and I have carried it on."

"But dear," said her mother, laughing. "I had a smaller roasting pan and the turkey wouldn't fit without cutting the neck off."

Do you know why each of your family's traditions are celebrated? It's an important question, and one that is not often asked.

If a tradition, celebration, or practice stands in the way of you celebrating the joy of Christmas, cut it out, like a cancer, before it spreads and kills your Christmas spirit altogether.

Don't be dismayed by relatives who complain that "It just wouldn't be Christmas without [insert tradition here]!" Yes, it would still be Christmas without the tradition, just as the Grinch finally realized. Any particular tradition or celebration is done for the sake of Christmas, not the other way around.

There are also those who are overly distracted positively by particular celebrations of Christmas. They obsessively need to do make a big Christmas dinner, have a real Christmas tree, or Christmas is ruined for them. They have become enslaved by a particular celebration of Christmas. This can be just as damaging as a loathing for a particular activity, because one's enjoyment of the holiday is transfixed on something that may not always be possible given a particular year's circumstances.

Taming the Inner Grinch

Since the Grinch's problem is distraction by the means of celebration, ruthlessly cut out those things that annoy you in your own celebration. Sit down with your family and discuss what activities each of you likes the most, and which activities you each find annoying. If there is anything that is unanimously detested, do not keep doing it! And while some sacrifices can be made for the sake of others, insisting that the entire family participate in an activity that one of more of you can't stand is not going to be a glowing family moment.

If you have a Grinch in your life, a friend, family member, or co-worker, ask them what things they dislike the most. Share with them

the things that drive you up a wall about the celebration of Christmas. Then turn the discussion towards things they enjoy about the season. Try to reinforce those aspects they find positive as best you can.

Christmas will always come without the trimmings. It will come without ribbons. It will come without tags. It will come without packages, boxes and tags. It will still come without gifts, turkey or feast, and it is not caused by Christmas cards in the least. It will come without Santa, it will come without candy. It can come without music, if you find that idea dandy. If there's something about Christmas that causes a fit, then by all means – get rid of it!

Playlist suggestions: Less “Deck the Halls” and more of... well, whatever carols inspire *you*. Music is a very personal taste, so carefully choose songs and renditions that you find uplifting. If necessary, avoid randomized playlists like the radio or streaming music services; the wrong song can send you into the depths at an emotional time such as Christmas is.

Avoid “We Need a Little Christmas” like the plague. Lyrics like “Haul out the holly/Put up the tree/Before my spirit falls again” are probably the last thing you want to hear.

Ebenezer Scrooge – The Fearful

"What's Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books and having every item in 'em through a round dozen of months presented dead against you? If I could work my will," said Scrooge indignantly, "every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart."

It is hard to have not heard the story of Charles Dickens' *Christmas Carol*. It has been a staple of Christmas celebrations almost since it was written. It is the origination of not only "Bah, Humbug" but also the phrase "Merry Christmas."

With the classic status of the story, its villain and hero Ebenezer Scrooge entered our everyday language. A "Scrooge" became a harsh nickname and insult for anyone miserly. You can hear the name muttered all year round, for the legacy of Scrooge has reached far beyond the holiday season.

Scrooge gets a bad rap for being selfish, but that characterization rightly belongs to a more simple, greedy character such as Mr. Potter from *It's A Wonderful Life*. Where does it say Scrooge was rich anyway? Wealth is implied in many adaptations of the story, but the original work casts Scrooge as a working-class business owner, not necessarily having amassed a fortune or being well-off.

Fear is anxious anticipation of loss, and Scrooge fears the world – and poverty – to the point of being ungenerous even to himself. He does not necessarily have much, but he fears the loss of it.

When *A Christmas Carol* was published, on the 19th of December, 1843, Charles Dickens's wife was expecting their 5th child, and the book was intended to be a "pot-boiler," a book written for the sake of generating funds quickly. There is a possibility that Dickens, like Theo Geisel, wrote his Christmas story with a bit of self-chastisement in mind while troubled by financial pressures that Christmas season.

Scrooge's partner, Jacob Marley, appears with a myriad of other phantoms with the first warning. Their torment, it is explained, is to wander the earth able to witness the suffering of their fellow man, but unable in death to do anything. The time for action is only in life.

Scrooge is then visited, as most of us all know, by specters of his past, the present world to which he had turned a blind eye, and then to the future, after he is gone and only his legacy is left. I will not lengthen this little book by retelling in detail a tale told so often, and told so well and briefly by the original author, except to summarize that Scrooge's redemption was achieved in the past, fanned into passion in the present, and finally sealed with new fear in the future.

Cold and hard as he is, the sights, smells, and sounds of his past move Scrooge to pity at the sight of his own lonely childhood. His heart breaks again at the parting of Belle, who bluntly points out that he fears the world too much as she walks out of his life. His fear left him unable to act to save the relationship, and a stubborn yet wiser Scrooge realizes that his fear caused an even greater loss.

"You fear the world too much," she answered, gently. "All your other hopes have merged into the hope of being beyond the chance of its sordid reproach. I have seen your nobler aspirations fall off one by one, until the master-passion, Gain, engrosses you."

The visit of the Ghost of Christmas Present echoes the theme of social justice that Dickens campaigned. Building on Marley's initial visit, the Ghost shows Scrooge joy, even in poverty, which comes from generosity.

Through the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, Dickens makes no appeal to a fear of God, but instead appeals to a fear of the legacy left behind. Scrooge recoils as he witnesses a couple gladdened by his death, the businessmen he esteemed referring to "Old Scratch" getting his own, the grave-robbers giddy with finally receiving something from him, even if only in death. Only in death does Scrooge give joy to others.

His fear of the world is finally and eventually replaced with a fear of a cold and hated future, but only after he confronts his lonely and heart-rending mistakes of the past and witnessing the joyous opportunities he was forsaking in his misguided miserly misery. The character of Scrooge is most greatly contrasted by that of his "foolish" nephew, Fred. Fred's generosity, which according to Scrooge he cannot afford, is persistent. Fred does not merely invite his uncle to Christmas dinner (which one can safely assume was rejected in earlier years) but does not take the first no, or even the first insult, as an answer. While few of us may be as miserly as Scrooge, how few of us are as persistently generous as Fred!

Are you afraid of overdoing it at Christmas? Do you find yourself fretting of the time and expense of the season? If worry and anxiety mark your Christmas celebration, then Scrooge is likely your

personal Christmas villain.

Scrooge reminds us that you don't have to be rich to be a miser. It is so incredibly easy for earthly cares, especially money, to consume us. It even seems at times that our culture seems to like the old Scrooge better; there are numerous articles published over the years defending the old, unreformed Scrooge. This is fear of the world, and it goes hand in hand with an assumption of tremendous personal responsibility for your material welfare.

This attitude could not be more opposite from the Gospel of Jesus Christ, whose birthday we celebrate at Christmas. In the sermon on the mount alone (Matthew 5-7) there are statements such as:

"Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?"

Also consider the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21) and the rebuke of one who has achieved success in his worldly endeavors. The Christmas Child went to a great extent to counsel us against fear of the world and material concerns. Certainly He does not want such cares to plague you as you celebrate His birth!

Soothing the Inner Scrooge

If you find yourself facing an inner Scrooge each year, recall that in *A Christmas Carol* the best examples of generosity are those demonstrated to family and friends. You need not dispose of your

possessions to strangers, but at the very least we owe it to our families, friends, co-workers and business associates the time and the expression of hope. Charity truly begins at home.

Christians (who I may remind you are the ones that are supposed to be celebrating the Christmas season) have not offered sacrifices of animals since Christ's time on earth. Yet we can still make sacrifices to bring earthly joy to others, especially those close to us. Put it this way: a little time to enjoy the company of others or give gifts, or share a feast, is quite small compared to offering a blood sacrifice of a cow or sheep. However it is far more pleasing to God, and far more fitting for a celebration of His birth as a human child.

The story of *A Christmas Carol* has been hacked almost to death by its many adaptations for movie and TV screens, some literally including song and dance routines. I would suggest re-reading the original if you find yourself staring Scrooge in the mirror. More than any other Christmas villain named in this book, the original tale of the redemption of Scrooge contains the counsel to those who share his illness.

Remember why you are celebrating Christmas in the first place, and for the sake of everyone around you, and yourself, relax and trust that the generous God who gave his own Son for our salvation will take care of your daily needs. To that end, re-reading the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is a good section of the Gospel to add to your Christmas celebration.

Playlist Suggestions: Early in *A Christmas Carol*, *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen* is sung to Scrooge by the boy in the street. It's actually a very appropriate song for those struggling with Scrooge within.

Jack Skellington – The Selfish

"You know, I think this Christmas thing is not as tricky as it seems! But why should they have all the fun? It should belong to anyone! Not anyone, in fact, but me! Why, I could make a Christmas tree! And there's not a reason I can find, I couldn't have a Christmastime! I bet I could improve it, too! And that's exactly what I'll do!"

There are a myriad of Christmas villains that have embodied a greedy thirst for possessions, attention, or some other temporal benefit for themselves. A lot of the ones I considered were T.V.-special, one-dimensional stock characters that have become, shall we say, Christmas cookie-cutter. Among the more spectacular ones were B.Z. from *Santa Claus: The Movie*, Mr. Potter from *It's a Wonderful Life*, Heat Miser, Freeze Miser, and the other Rankin-Bass Christmas villains who wanted to stop Christmas for their own reasons.

Yet when it comes to choosing a Christmas villain that seemed to best embody the selfishness of all those villains, but was relatable, one who is converted and not conquered, and part of a story that is generally considered a classic, Jack Skellington from *The Nightmare Before Christmas* takes the pumpkin pie.

Bored with his life as the Pumpkin King and master of the Halloween holiday, Jack wanders into Christmas town and discovers the very different trimmings and feelings the celebration of Christmas inspires. He becomes frustrated that he can't understand any of it, even (or especially) by scientific analysis of the material trimmings and trappings.

Finally it dawns on him that Christmas could be his. He has Santa Claus kidnapped, steals his hat, has the monsters and beasts of Halloween town build a sleigh, undead reindeer, and frightful toys, and proceeds to take over Christmas.

The result, of course, is a nightmare for the world and for the simple residents of Halloween town who struggle to grasp the concepts of spreading joy, happiness, and peace. Jack's obsession causes him to neglect his duties as leader of Halloween town. By forcing his own followers, and the world, to accept his new ownership of the holiday, he becomes a tyrant.

Jack Skellington is well-intentioned. That's one of the reasons he's such a great model for the selfish Christmas villain. Other selfish villains admit that money or possessions are their reasons for stealing Christmas, putting Santa out of business, or destroying the holiday. Jack thinks he's doing it for everyone else. He really does want to give the world a jolly Christmas like they've never had before. No matter how he lies to himself though, it is clear from the start he is doing it for himself, out of boredom with his regular life. True to the old saying, the story of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* becomes a tale of good intentions paving a path to hell.

When his friend Sally has a prophetic vision of a Christmas tree bursting into flame, Jack is blind to the possibility of failure:

*"That's not *my* Christmas! *My* Christmas is filled with laughter, and joy... and this: my Sandy Claws outfit."*

You have probably heard that phrase, "My Christmas" from someone before. Perhaps even yourself. "My Christmas must have this" or "My Christmas will have that." Or the related phrase, "It just

wouldn't be Christmas without..."

It is ironic that Jack, who is doing so many Christmas-y things, is the selfish one, contrasted to lonely, miserly Scrooge who is often portrayed as the face of Christmas greed. Yet it is the overbearing, tyrannical selfishness of a Jack-like Christmas "spirit" that drives the Grinch, and those like him, to distraction and hatred of Christmas.

It is not just hard on others. Taking ultimate responsibility for your own vision of Christmas creates an incredible pressure and even anxiety over the coming of Christmas. Trying to make the celebration of the holiday fit a certain plan sets expectations that are beyond your human ability to control. Judging the success of the holiday by how closely it ends up resembling the ideas in your head will end in misery, for yourself and those around you.

Tempering the Inner Jack Skellington

It takes hitting rock bottom for Jack to realize he'd overstepped his bounds (he is bone-headed, after all). Hopefully for the rest of us it just takes listening to what everyone, including yourself, really wants to do to celebrate Christmas and not making assumptions that you know better.

If Jack Skellington is your Christmas villain, then you need to let go. You are heaping unnecessary pressure on yourself by trying to control the Christmas celebration. You are not made to be responsible for the happiness of others, even at Christmas. Christmas is the celebration of the reception of a gift, God's only Son. He who holds creation in His hands could have made the first Christmas shine with all the glory and attention the wealth of the world could offer. Instead He chose a lowly and inconvenient birth. The event was glorious and important enough of its own accord; it did not need glamour and fanfare. From this truth learn to rejoice in your salvation, and let go of trying to control its memorial.

Find out what those around you really want in their celebration of Christmas. If you live with a Grinch, you are probably going to be doing a Christmas tradition inventory, because you both need it.

What you may think has been bringing joy to others may only be bringing headaches. If those around you then don't seem to be "in the spirit" you expect, you are going to be bitterly disappointed. As a result you may try harder the next time.

Truth be told, the remedy to conquering the Christmas villains is similar. Simplify. Re-examine why you are celebrating Christmas. Figure out what traditions really have meaning to you and yours and focus on those activities.

The reason for there being a common solution is because there is a common root to all Christmas villains, which is the subject of the next section, dealing with the ultimate Christmas villain archetype.

Playlist Suggestions – *The Friendly Beasts*, *The Gift* by Aselin Debison, or *Good King Wenceslaus* – songs that tell a story of sacrificial gifts and the giving of self.

Miss Doris Walker – The Unbeliever

"We should be realistic and completely truthful with our children and not have them growing up believing in a lot of legends and myths like Santa Claus, for example. ... by filling them full of fairy tales they grow up considering life a fantasy instead of a reality."

Calling Doris Walker a villain may seem excessive, but as the main antagonist in *Miracle on 34th Street* she is perhaps the worst of the dastardly bunch. Scrooge fears celebrating Christmas will lead to ruin; the Grinch abhors the noise and bustle; Jack Skellington wants to own it and do it all his way. But Miss Walker embraces the bustle and disregards the core of the celebration, the reason for its existence. She lacks hope, and tries to smother it in others.

Perhaps the most terrifying fact about Miss Walker is that she is the most real and least exaggerated of these Christmas villains. She is not a caricature, but portrayed as an ordinary person, like you or me.

Jaded when her romantic dreams of youth were shattered, Doris refuses to acknowledge anything but the obvious reality. No fairy tales, no unrealistic dreams, and no Christmas. Well, there is Christmas, with family and gifts and turkey, but no Santa and – though unspoken – no belief in the story of the Christ child, the reason for it all. In other words, no hope for anything beyond what you see with your eyes.

Judging by the fruits, consider that Walker's actions set into play all that transpires; Sawyer the psychiatrist and Mara the prosecutor would not have had a chance to attack Kris if Walker had not handed

him over to them. For Kris Kringle himself, Walker personified a growing disbelief and lack of faith the world over. Her despair sows chaos, unhappiness and discord.

It's not just about Santa Claus and Christmas. In fact, there's a bit of Doris Walker's practical unbelief in every other villain. Greed, fear, and distraction require one to take their eyes off the real meaning of Christmas, existence, and the universe. Despite the fact that Miss Walker has no other "villain" qualities except her unbelief, it's the first step to other perversions. In the same manner, the first sin in the Garden of Eden was not disobedience, but the doubting of God's word. Doubt and unbelief is always the first step to other – worse – evils. It is this knowledge that terrifies Kris Kringle, causes him to despair and allow himself to be committed to the asylum.

Doris' despair is contagious. While it is shocking that Kris Kringle himself is affected, it is especially tragic in the case of her daughter. A childhood deprived not just of fairy tales and magic, but of imagination and hope. Our views of God are shaped by our parents. Teaching them that all things have material explanations will kill the mysticism and deny them the ability to see the wondrous things in everyday life. And if creation loses its wonder, its Creator ceases to be wonderful or worthy of praise. Perhaps it is the fact that we have so many material explanations that the modern world can no longer see miracles.

What of us, then? How might this unbelief and doubt reveal itself?

First, we have to consider that this doubt may be the root cause of any feelings of selfishness, fear, or distractedness in our celebration of Christmas. It is not a long-term solution to conquer the inner Grinch, Scrooge or Pumpkin King only to have feelings of

doubt rise up and nurture the same or a new villain arise.

It may show itself as cynicism, skepticism, and bitterness. At Christmas we speak, pray, and sing of peace on earth, and goodwill to all – but that is not the case. We need no secular rebuke, we have it from Jesus Himself. He tells us the poor shall be with us always, that He Himself will bring division and not peace, and that the world will be full of wars and rumors of wars which must take place. Such a bleak outlook at the reality of our material world can make the hopeful proclamation of peace and goodwill sound hollow.

Finally, it may show as despair. It is a horrifying tragedy that the holiday season has an increased rate of suicide. Suicide, as G.K. Chesterton noted, is not merely the destruction of the self but the destruction of the world. It is an act of ultimate despair, finding nothing worthy in all of creation. For despair to be so prominent at a time of such expression of God's love, promises, and hope for mankind is evidence of an epidemic of unchecked doubt. Even if your own periods of despair never reach such tragic levels, they must be addressed as symptoms of doubt.

Conquering the Inner Miss Walker

Once her eyes are opened to just how much of life her own doubt had closed off, Doris Walker counsels her daughter in how to believe:

Faith is believing when common sense tells you not to.

In today's world, there is a lot more than just our senses and common sense telling us that only what we can see is real. Miss Walker is correct in identifying Faith as an active virtue, one that we must be persistent in cultivating. Faith is not the absence of doubt; it

is the persistence of belief despite doubt, just as courage is persistence in the face of fear, not the absence of fear. Make sure to remind yourself constantly during your celebration of Christmas, in word, action, decoration, and example, of the real reason for the celebration.

Re-center and simplify your Christmas. Surround yourself with the sights, sounds and smells that call to mind the meaning of Christmas – God's great love that brought him to life as man, and a man in poverty and oppression at that. While images of cartoonish Santas and snowmen may be distracting, seek to find the meaning and purpose in common symbols of the season. Purposefully choose decorations like the evergreen that represents eternal life and the eternal love of God, and a simple crèche as a reminder of Jesus' crude birth.

Giving freely as you have received can be powerful as well. Not just in material things, but giving of your time as well, either to family, friends, or strangers. As you give of yourself – either a sacrifice of your material means, volunteering, or even the traditional giving of presents – remind yourself of the blessings you have received, especially the one of God's only Son. Be sure to receive gifts from others with this in mind as well; giving of a Christmas gift is a sacred and solemn reminder to us all of the Ultimate Gift. Our generosity to one another is merely a feeble, humble attempt to give thanks the Giver of all. This is just one way we all participate in the vocation of the angels – whose name means “messenger of God.”

Finally, do not neglect your own communication with God. Renew your prayer life, and make it a priority to participate in church services throughout the season preceding Christmas (traditionally known as Advent) and throughout the Christmas season. If you've fallen away from regular prayer and attending church, this is an

excellent time to resume the practice, and continuing it on into the next year.

Playlist Suggestions: *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem of despair and hope, composed while his son was recovering from wounds during the Civil War, is a very fitting song for times of doubt.

*I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!
And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!
Till, ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime,
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!
Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!
It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!*

*And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said:
 "For hate is strong,
 And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"*

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!
 The Wrong shall fail,
 The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men!"*

Saving Christmas

The modern made-for-TV Christmas movie genre has a recurring theme of “saving Christmas.” Through some extraordinary events rather ordinary people manage to save Christmas - by which they mean Santa Claus, Christmas spirit, or the celebration of the holiday itself. Of course, they generally neglect the real Christmas, which Christians, Whos, and redeemed Grinches would celebrate anyway.

There is something from that shallow idea that does ring true, especially if you’re having another one of those Christmas seasons you hate. It is up to you, an ordinary person, to save Christmas for yourself. No one else is going to do it. No amount of gifts, traditions, photos, memory-making moments, family, friends, church services or spirituality will make Christmas mean more to you. If you aren’t open to it, even God Himself won’t be able to make you experience Christmas better.

There is a legend that in the early 1900s, the Times of London asked well-known authors to write essays on what was wrong with the world. G.K. Chesterton submitted the shortest reply:

“Dear Sirs, I am. Sincerely yours, G.K. Chesterton.”

The story keeps getting repeated because it strikes a universal note. What’s wrong with your Christmas? You are.

That is, your attitude and your perspective are all you can change. As much as you might wish for your spouse or children or co-workers to improve Christmas, the only thing you can control is your own will. For a Christmas display in the store before Halloween to upset you, you have to let it. Just because someone else is using, abusing, or ignoring Christmas doesn’t mean you have to take it personally and let it poison your thoughts.

A brief aside - if you have certain people in your life that are explicitly telling you what you should and ought to do for them to

enjoy Christmas, that is a more serious issue that involves them crossing a boundary. I suggest reading *Boundaries* by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend for more help with dealing with those kind of personal invasions. You are still limited to what actions you can take, but sometimes more involved and drastic measures must be taken. They even wrote an edition specifically for relationships with children.

As a Christian, we are called to constantly turn our wills towards God's Will. In a fallen world, this requires an ongoing re-turning, or to use the Latin word *volvere* (to turn), an eternal re-volution. What better point in the calendar year to ignite this once again, at the celebration of our Saviour's birth? There may indeed be a war on Christmas, but the battle fought within you is far more important than buzzwords and displays and news stories in the media. Defend the front this year, and take back your Christmas celebration by identifying and silencing your own Christmas villains.

So who's going to save Christmas this year? If you're going to do it (and no one else can) it starts right now with the resolve to keep Christmas, and not let anyone - even your internal Christmas villain - get in the way.

Also by Paul Nowak

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The Microcapitalist Manifesto

The Inconvenient Adventures of Uncle Chestnut